

# ORANGE COUNTY

## The Annotated Bits & Bytes

*Adult reflections on a children's play about computers*

*"Telephones, the radio and television all changed how we live when most folks got them in their homes. Those were the revolutions, friends! And it's happening again, right now, with computers...you've got to get in on it, be a part of it, because it's going to be a part of you for all the rest of your days!..."*

In the process of developing *Bits & Bytes*, South Coast Repertory's 1983 Education Touring Production about the computer revolution, a number of issues uncovered in the research seemed equally pertinent for adults as for the show's intended audience of children.

The birth of the electronic computer is, after all, still an event with-

in living memory and many of us were privy to the controversy and emotional speculation that trailed in its wake. Enthusiasts hailed it as man's long-awaited deliverance from drudgery, the turning point into a new and modern age. Critics damned it as a threat to the integrity of human thought and emotion. Debates notwithstanding, there was no turning back and 40 years later the revolution has arrived in full force.

Pac-Man to the left of us, Donkey Kong to the right of us, computers in their various guises have volleyed and thundered their way into the national consciousness. They have infiltrated daily routine; they have penetrated the most remote areas of



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human endeavor. Small, smart, fast and affordable they have taken the buying public by storm.

Technical improvement and a lower price tag are not the only factors responsible for the current computer "craze." Computers, having demonstrated their "on-the-job" efficiency and versatility, have shown us they can also be fun. Entertainment is the one feature that has probably done more for the image of computers than all the innovations and shrewd merchandizing put together. For with the addition of color, action and sound, computers have seduced even the most apathetic and computer-shy. They cater to a human desire to participate, compete and control in a way television never could, and underlying their immense commercial success is their ability to satisfy our pragmatic concerns while simultaneously appealing to our love of gadgets and toys. Put simply, computers are the perfect product.

And if computers are the perfect product, children might well be considered the perfect consumers. Raised in the era of digital gimmickry and video games, they are unlikely to experience the same reticence toward computers as their parents. For the



**Left:** *The Bugs Brothers* (Sam Hamann and Robert Crow) are in a scene from *Bits & Bytes*. **Above:** An unhappy Happy (Laura Leyva) learns about computers from Mr. Chips (Robert Crow) in this production for children about the computer revolution. **Right:** James LeGross and Laura Leyva gather around the computer with children from the audience.

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most part, children are curious, enthusiastic and more than willing to embrace the new technology. And given the current push for computer literacy in the schools, they are doing just that.

The goal of *Bits & Bytes* was to show the realistic capabilities of computers as distinguished from commercial "hype" and science fiction fantasy. A second objective was to emphasize those talents unique to human beings; what it is that makes us different from computers.

The plot itself is simple: Morton B. Norton, a sort of Cal Worthington of computerware, tries to land a potential customer, a naive young prospect called Happy, who far from what her name implies, has an overload of problems. Assisting in the sales pitch are Norton's trusty side-kicks, Bits, Bytes and Mr. Chips plus an assortment of colorful characters who explain a good deal about computers: what they are, how they

work, what they can and can't do.

What they can't do is a salient point of the production. Yet the irresistible urge to anthropomorphize computers (and this was refrained from in the show), is an understandable tendency. Part reflex, part fancy, it is in no way indicative of any delusion on our part that computers are actually human. Computers neither think nor remember in the same way we do. We know they don't have feelings. We know they are not human. But given that more and more of us will be spending time around computers, it's still a distinction worth being reminded of.

Any parable worth its salt must contain a moral, and the moral of *Bits & Bytes* is that computers are neither threats nor panaceas; they are machines. To be sure, they are innovative constructions but they remain reliant on human instruction, insight and imagination to make them function. What use we make of

computers and what we gain or sacrifice in the process remains our choice and our responsibility. In the face of an increasing intimacy with computers and an inevitable and growing dependency upon them, our greatest task as human beings may well be to maintain our perspective; an awareness of who we are and what it is we have to offer.

"Get your computers right away,  
There's no reason to delay,  
From Washington out to L.A.,  
The revolution's in full sway!  
Don't you wait another day,  
Learn about them right away,  
How they work and how they play,  
It's for sure, they're here to stay.  
Computers, computers, computers, com-  
puters—  
HERE TO STAY!!!"

(Ensemble, *Bits & Bytes*)

*Bits & Bytes* is currently touring schools and community centers throughout Southern California through June 16th.

—Valerie Smith  
and Michael Bigelow Dixon



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